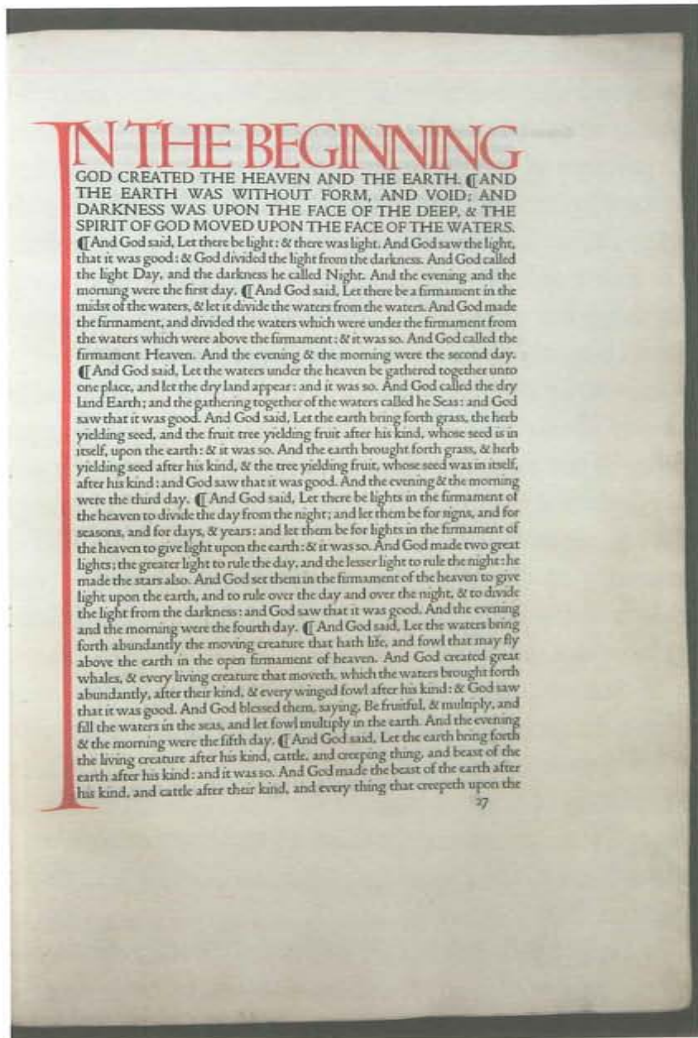


*Who are we?* and *What are we doing?* Rather than asking these fundamental questions, the book community is more often concerned with their pointed cousins: *Who are YOU?* and *What are YOU doing?* Within the community of typographic printers the problem of identity is generally assumed to be a problem suffered by book artists, by those *other people* working outside of the well-defined sanctum of the Fine Press. This comfortable view overlooks a division within the letterpress community that is too often blurred and as a result is the source of my greater concern: *Does the private press have a future?*

So: *Who are we?* The division I'm speaking of is embodied in the very phrase Fine Press, which to my mind is an improper fusing of two separate, though venerable, traditions: the private press and the fine printer. What I mean by a fine printer is a commercial outfit for whom the object to be printed is secondary to the principles of proportion, legibility, and craftsmanship being applied. In other words, the fine printer exerts equivalent energies and means on the printing of a book as he does on the printing of a book mark. The private press printer, on the other hand, is a craftsman who is possessed of an irrepressible need to make Books; is someone for whom the printing of a text demands a set of considerations that *do not apply* in the commercial print shop; and is usually someone who is characterized by an incendiary mixture of iconoclasm and reverence.

To explore this division I'd like to first look at two iconic images from the life of T.J. Cobden-Sanderson. The first is the opening of the Doves Press Bible published between 1903 and 1905. Few pages so effectively display the talents at work in



The opening of the Book of Genesis in the Doves Press Bible

the British private press. The type was a revival conceived by the Doves partners Emery Walker and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson. It was rendered by Walker's employee Percy Tiffin, cut by the great punch cutter Edward Prince, and accompanied by Edward Johnston's calligraphy. Doves Press books are unusual even among their peers for their lack of illustrations; in as much as their pages are beautiful their beauty derives entirely from the forms, arrangements, and printing of their letter forms.

Founded in 1900, the Doves Press partnership did not go well for long. In many ways, the problems at the press derived from the fact that Walker was too much of a fine commercial printer and Cobden-Sanderson too much of a private press printer. As relations deteriorated, Cobden-Sanderson resolved that he would not allow the Doves type to be used for commercial purposes as he had originally agreed with Walker. When Walker responded with a lawsuit, Cobden-Sanderson wrote to Sidney Cockerell:

*His 'proceedings' at the utmost can only result in 'damages' or imprisonment: and to think of that! for nothing on earth will now induce me to part with the type. I have 'devoted' it to the Press and I have full power to do so. I have the will, and I have in my actual possession the punches and the matrices, without which it is impossible to have a Fount of Type. Pray believe that I am stating this wholly for E.W.'s sake and inspired by old memories and by the affection which still stirs in the background of all this miserable strife. I am, what he does not appear to realise, a Visionary and a Fanatic, and against a Visionary and a Fanatic he will beat himself in vain.*





The view down to the Thames from the Hammersmith bridge

Which brings me to my second image: the view down to the Thames from the southwest pier of the Hammersmith Bridge. It is the precise spot from which, over the course of six months in 1916, at the age of 76, Cobden-Sanderson threw almost 2,600 pounds of Doves type that he carried to the bridge in the middle of the night from over a mile away; thereby bequeathing, in his words, the type to the river. Although he had already thrown the punches and matrices of the type into the Thames three years earlier, this final criminal act made two points perfectly clear: 1) Cobden-Sanderson would sooner expose himself to imprisonment and penury than allow his type to be sullied by commerce, and 2) that there could be no Doves Press without the Doves type.

When we take a survey of the great works of the private press, it is clear that although Cobden-Sanderson's act was extreme in its demonstration, the ideas it expressed were core values of the entire movement. [see images overleaf] What these works demonstrate is that proprietary types were a defining characteristic of the private press. Not simply because there were no handsome types available, but because it was understood that the types of the commercial foundries were subject to considerations of utility, expediency, and breadth of application; considerations that run contrary at their very core to the aims of the private press, in which utility, expediency, and breadth are abandoned in favor of a specific vision. To quote William Morris, "I ask you, therefore, to accept [my writing] as a contribution toward the revolt against utilitarianism." Commercial types by their nature are corrupted by the requirements of commerce.